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ABSTRACT

This report describes a study of Asian educators of English as a Second Language and how they approached the gender-inclusion change in English classes and curriculum materials. The actual change is outlined, focusing on the shift away from the use of gender-exclusive generic "he" to more gender-inclusive forms, and the shift away from the use of gender-exclusive "man" to a more gender-inclusive form. Subjects were 35 nonnative-speaker English language instructors from 9 Asian countries attending a regional language center course; they averaged 12 years of experience as teachers, materials writers, and curriculum planners. Participants listened to a 45-minute presentation on gender-exclusion, answered a questionnaire, and were interviewed. The written language of several subjects was analyzed, and participants were all asked for feedback on the subject and the study. Results revealed that the majority used gender-exclusive materials in their classes. Most reported they would now use gender-inclusive materials, although some cited situational constraints, such as tradition or lack of materials, as restricting their change to gender-inclusive. The context dependent nature of this particular language use is stressed; decision to use gender-inclusive or gender-exclusive language must be based on the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge and beliefs of the educator. (Contains 29 references.) (NAV)

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ED 395 471

ASIAN SECOND-LANGUAGE EDUCATIONISTS' VIEWS ON GENDER-INCLUSIVE ENGLISH

Paper presented at the annual SEAMEO Regional Language Centre Seminar, 22-24 April 1996, Singapore

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Introduction

All languages change (Fromkin and Rodman, 1993). Language educators must be aware of these changes and help keep their students up to date with them. One area of current change in the English language is the controversial shift from gender-exclusive language, such as "Everyone should do his duty" and "Man has done great damage to the environment" to more gender-inclusive language, such as "Everyone should do their duty" and "People have done great damage to the environment (Crystal, 1995). The present study was designed to assess Asian L2 (second language) educationists' views on this shift as it regards the English language.

In the first part of this article the shift is described. The second part provides background on the Asian context. Next, the methodology used to collect data for the present study is explained. Then, the results of the study are presented and discussed. Finally, suggestions are made regarding implications and further research.

The Shift to Gender-Inclusive English

The change in the English language investigated in the present study has been characterized as one from gender-exclusive to gender-inclusive language. Terms similar to but not necessarily completely equivalent to gender-inclusive are gender-neutral, sex-fair, nonsexist, and gender-free (Treichler and Frank, 1989). The term "gender-inclusive" implies that both females and males are explicitly "included" by the language used. For example, "A doctor should help his patients" could be understood as excluding females from being doctors.

There are several aspects of the trend toward gender-inclusive English. The present study focused two of these:

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(1) The shift away from the use of gender-exclusive *generic he*, e.g., "A doctor should keep his patients informed", to gender-inclusive forms, e.g., "Doctors should keep their patients informed" or "A doctor should keep her or his patients informed"; (2) The shift away from the use of gender-exclusive *generic man*, e.g., "Man has lived on the planet for over a million years", to gender-inclusive forms, e.g., "Humans have lived on the planet for over a million years".

The term "generic" implies that a word, such as *he*, is used "generally" to refer to both females and males.

The trend away from gender-exclusive English seems to have begun and gone furthest in countries where English is the main language, what Kachru (1995 and elsewhere) calls Inner Circle countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States. In some institutions in these countries, gender-inclusive language has become the standard to which all writing must conform. For example, organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), of the United States, have adopted guidelines advocating gender-inclusive language (Nilsen, 1987).

This move toward gender-inclusive English began at least as early as the early 1970s. For instance, in 1972, two major U.S. publishers, McGraw-Hill and Scott, Foresman, came out with guidelines (Nilsen, 1987). The NCTE guidelines were promulgated in 1976. At the level of personal use, Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) cite several studies which show significant change in the U.S.

The shift in language use resulted from social, political, and economic changes in Inner Circle countries which may not have taken place or may have had different effects in other countries. However, the switch toward gender-inclusive English impacts language use beyond the Inner Circle countries. This impact is due to English's status as the world's main international language and an important language of intranational communication in many countries outside the Inner Circle, people everywhere will encounter these changes. Related to the international role of English is the presence of English teachers from Inner Circle countries in educational institutions around the world.

Change is not a linear process. For example, Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) cite studies indicating more resistance to gender-inclusive English among U.S. university students than among older people. They also found that this change is not evenly distributed, as females are more likely than males to use gender-inclusive language. Situational variables also affect language use. Rubin and Greene (1991) found that college-age men used less gender-inclusive language when interviewed by people of the same age and sex.

Gender-Inclusive English in Asia

The present study was conducted in Asia, a continent where the role of English, as well as many other phenomena, differs widely from country to country. For instance, English is widely used in daily life in countries such as the Philippines and Singapore. In other countries, such as Cambodia, China, and

Indonesia, English is a foreign language, restricted mostly to international communication.

Moves are underway in Asia to encourage the use of gender-inclusive English (e.g., AWARE, 1995). Indications of this change are already present. For instance, some recent English language textbooks produced in the Philippines (Austria, 1995; Department of Education, Culture and Sports, 1994) and Singapore (Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1994) contain gender-inclusive language, although not consistently. However, some would question whether parallel social, political, and economic changes have taken place in this region, and if they have, whether these are beneficial changes which should be sanctioned and supported by changes in language use. As English becomes more and more an international language with local varieties emerging, perhaps the varieties of English used in Asian countries (which are in either Kachru's Outer Circle and Expanding Circle) need not conform to changes which the language is undergoing in Inner Circle countries.

Aegintitou, et al. (1994) investigated the views of 57 English language teachers studying in England and were informed by the 14 teachers who were from Malaysia that gender inclusive English there was "not that popular yet ..., except for a few terms" (p. 10). The present study sought to further examine the views of Asian second language educationists on the issue of gender-inclusive English.

Methodology

Participants

35 nonnative speaker English language educators from nine Asian countries participated in the study. They were attending one of three courses at the SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) Regional Language Centre in Singapore and had an average of 12 years experience as teachers, materials writers, and curriculum planners. The countries represented were Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Other than the third author, who was a lecturer on the courses, all the researchers in this study were also participants.

Procedure

The third author announced in two of the courses that he was interested in doing a study of Asian second language educators' opinions and experiences related to gender-inclusive English, and asked if anyone was interested in forming a research team. No extra credit would be given for this. Four educators volunteered. The topic had been discussed briefly under the general heading of sociolinguistics, and members of those two courses had been given an article by Sunderland (1992) entitled "Gender in the EFL Classroom" which discusses gender-inclusive language and other related issues. The third author had expressed the view that although he used gender-inclusive English, he felt each person should be allowed to make their own informed choice on the matter, and that course members' use of

gender-inclusive or gender-exclusive would have no bearing on their grade in upcoming exams or assignments.

In order to help participants gain a basic understanding of the issue, the research team prepared a 45-minute presentation on the topic. After listening to the presentation, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire (Appendix A). The questionnaire was developed by the researchers and had been shown to two of the courses before being finalized to secure feedback on its clarity and completeness.

Data were also obtained via audio-taped interviews (Appendix B) with a stratified random sample of nine participants, one from each country. The semi-structured interviews (Nunan, 1992) were designed to gain greater insight on issues which emerged from the questionnaire. Data on participants' actual language use were collected by analyzing the written exams of 18 participants who were members of the same course for the use of gender-exclusive/inclusive English. The exam, for a course on Language Acquisition, was done after the discussion of the Sunderland article but before the research team's presentation. Finally, the second draft of this research report was distributed to approximately 24 of the participants for their feedback.

Results and Discussion

In this section, first, key results of the questionnaire will be presented and discussed with the benefit of insights gained from the interviews. Then, the findings from participants' writing will be presented.

For item 5 on the questionnaire, 32 out of the 35 participants reported that they had been taught gender-exclusive English as students. This result is not surprising in light of the previous dominance of gender-exclusive usage. The few who had been taught gender-inclusive said that this occurred at university. One interviewee reported having an American lecturer at her Singapore university around 1983 who vehemently demanded that only gender-inclusive be used, although this was a somewhat extreme case.

In response to the questionnaire item 6, slightly more than half the participants indicated that they had heard of gender-inclusive language before coming to the course. Some of those who had not heard of it were aware of the phenomenon but had not seen it given a name before. For example, one of the researchers from the Philippines noted that although gender-inclusive English was used in the handouts at inservice courses for teachers which she had attended in her country, the topic had never been mentioned.

A majority, 19, indicated that they taught or wrote materials using gender-exclusive English before coming for the course, 15 indicated gender-inclusive, and one wrote "both", even though that was not an option on the questionnaire (item 8). The percentage using gender-inclusive was greater than some of the researchers had expected. A Malaysian interviewee explained his use of gender-inclusive by saying that was what he found in the proficiency textbooks provided by the Ministry of Education.

Regarding the expected reaction of administrators to the use of gender-inclusive English (item 10), most participants, 26,

felt it would be neutral, seven felt it would be positive, and only two felt it would be negative. The expected reaction of society in general (item 11) was roughly the same with three switching from neutral to negative. Several interviewees suggested that one possible explanation for the lack of emotion on this issue may be that because English is a second language for most Asians, issues regarding the language itself are less deeply felt than among native speakers.

The large majority of participants, 29, reported on item 12 that they would use gender-inclusive rather than gender-exclusive English in their teaching and materials writing in the future. Of the rest, two were males and the others females. Among the reasons given by those who said they would use gender-inclusive English included it being fairer to females; avoiding possible confusion about whether females are included when generic *he* and generic *man* are used; its presence in instructional materials, and the belief that gender-inclusive is the emerging world standard. The idea that gender-inclusive is fairer to women fits the Whorfian Hypothesis (Whorf, 1956) that language influences people's perception of the world. The belief that gender-inclusive English reduces possible confusion is supported by research by Martyna (1980), Wilson (1978), and others cited by Wolfson, which found the use of generic *he* to be ambiguous for some people.

Another reason why so many participants seemed willing to change to gender-inclusive English is that many educators come to RELC looking to gain new ideas to share with colleagues in their home institutions. Gender-inclusive may have been seen as one of the "latest things", as it is used by a majority of RELC lecturers, and one lecturer who has not changed has been heard to express his regret.

Several reasons were given by those who said they would not teach gender-inclusive English. These included:

(1) the lack of materials in which gender-inclusive can be found;

(2) the concern that gender-exclusive is still felt by many people (possibly including those who mark national and international exams) to be the correct form;

(3) the tradition of using gender-exclusive;

(4) the belief that some gender-inclusive usage, e.g., *he or she*, is inelegant;

(5) the worry that the complexity of making students aware of two choices - gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive - would confuse and annoy them; and,

(6) the view that the whole issue is not important enough to make the effort to change worthwhile.

Some of the interviewees stated that were it not for reasons such as numbers 1, 2, and 5 above they would teach the gender-inclusive forms.

As to the analysis of participants' own writing on their Language Acquisition examination, of the 17 who participated in the study, ten used gender-exclusive language, and seven did not. Gender-inclusive language was explicitly used in all but two of these seven cases. For example, one participant wrote, "If someone wants to get the job, they have to know and use the standard language." An instance of gender-exclusive English was the participant who wrote, "A learner is a blank slate, whereby he has nothing in his mind." This writing was done before the researchers' presentation to the participants.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that the trend among Asian nonnative speaker English language educators mirrors the larger trend toward greater use of gender-inclusive English. However, just as Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) reported in regard to the US, among the participants in this study, the trend is not a homogeneous or linear one. Further, even educators who support gender-inclusive English may not be able to implement their view due to situational constraints.

The preference for gender-inclusive English found among participants in this study contrasts with the findings of an informal study done in 1987 with lectures of the English Language Proficiency Unit of the National University of Singapore (Michael Ferryman, personal communication, November 1995). In that study, the large majority of the 35 lecturers, approximately one-fifth of whom were Westerners, said that they would mark gender-inclusive English as wrong. Perhaps a different result would have been obtained were that study repeated today.

Implications for Teaching

Sunderland (1992) maintains that gender-exclusive/inclusive language, the focus of the present study, is one of three areas which need attention in the language classroom, aspects of the other two being:

(1) in instructional materials, more frequent appearance of males, stereotyped images of females and males, e.g., females as passive, males as active (Carroll & Kowitz, 1994);
(2) in classroom processes, lower participation by females in teacher-learner and learner-learner classroom interaction (Holmes, 1994).

Sunderland argues that these three areas are interrelated and that change is underway though not homogeneously.

Returning to the current study's focus, language educators have a special role to play in language change, as is highlighted in the "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language" in National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) publications, "Whether the members work as teachers, authors, or editors, they not only help shape students' language patterns but are also viewed by the public as custodians of what is 'correct' in the language" (NCTE, 1976, cited in Nilsen, 1987, p. 38).

The issue of gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive language impacts pedagogy in several ways, including:

(1) the choice of coursebooks and other instructional materials;
(2) the choice of grammar books and other reference works;

(3) the language educationists use when talking to students;
(4) the feedback which students receive on their language production;
(5) the scoring of tests and other assessment instruments.

The NCTE recommended but did not mandate gender-inclusive language. Gender-exclusive language was permitted in NCTE publications if an author stated that it was their specific intention to use such language (Nilsen, 1987). Nilsen cites the example of an article submitted to an NCTE publication. The editor changed the gender-exclusive language to gender-inclusive, but the author refused to allow the altered article to be published. This sparked a debate within NTCE which resulted in an amendment to the organization's guidelines, allowing authors to refuse to change to gender-inclusive language. As the 1985 version of the Guidelines states, "The role of education is to make choices available, not to limit opportunities. Censorship removes possibilities; these guidelines extend what is available by offering alternatives to traditional usages and to editorial choices that restrict meaning" (NCTE, 1985, cited in Nilsen, 1987, p. 54).

Such thinking is in line with Wolfson (1989) who concludes that L2 learners of English should be made aware of how and why English is changing, the implications of the language learners decide to use, and that this is a controversial issue. She advocates letting learners make their own informed decision based on their own cultural values. Wolfson (p. 183) argues that, "It is not the right or the obligation of teachers to try to change these cultural values ... ."

A similar stance has been taken in regard two standardized international tests of English proficiency IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and ACCESS (a test given to those wishing to immigrate to Australia). Ingram (1995), a key developer of both tests, states that although inclusive language is becoming increasingly routine in Inner Circle varieties of English, and the specifications for the two exams advocate its use, caution is used to avoid discrimination against examinees from countries where inclusive English has not been encountered or taught and/or is seen as a trivial matter or in contradiction with the examinees' culture.

We agree. Further, in the classroom and in materials, helping students analyze the language they encounter and produce, and telling them that they have to make their own choices, no matter how much they may want the teacher and the coursebook to tell them the "right" answer, facilitates the development of thinking skills (Adams, 1989). We are not, however, advocating neutrality. We believe that at the same time that educators should respect students' right to make their own informed choices, we should also inform them of the informed choices we have made and the rationale behind them.

Based on our own analysis of our different educational contexts, the investigators in the present study use gender-inclusive English for the practical reason that, fortunately, it seems to be the emerging international standard. Nevertheless, even if it was not becoming the standard, we would support its use because of its role in promoting equality. As Rubin and

Greene, (1992: p. 34) point out, "Curriculum decisions ... require a commitment to what ought to be as well as knowledge of what is".

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The research had many limitations, thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution. One, the number of participants in the study, 34, is far too small to generate conclusions about the views of second language educators in the eight countries from which they came, let alone for all of Asia. Two, as Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) point out, expressed attitudes are not always accurate indicators of what people actually do or even believe. Thus, although the large majority of participants indicated that they would teach gender-inclusive English, no data were collected on their actual educational practices. Three, on the questionnaire, where participants were asked to choose between gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive, perhaps they also should have been able to choose *both*. Several participants indicated that this was their real view on some of the items. Indeed, this issue, like so many others, is much more complicated than any either/or choices would indicate.

Several ideas suggest themselves for future research on this topic. One, as indicated above, Asian educators' behaviour in their teaching, materials writing, etc. should be studied. Two, Asian students' views and practices should be investigated. Three, the gender-exclusive/inclusive issue deserves attention in other languages (Ho Wah Kam, personal communication). Two studies currently underway, Jacobs and Hsui (in preparation) and Zhuo (1995) address the second and third research ideas, respectively. Additionally, Gomard (1995) found that changes toward gender inclusive language were also underway in Danish and German.

Conclusion

To conclude, we want to stress the context dependent nature of language use. We urge that each educator make their own decision based on their linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge and beliefs, and that they encourage their students to do the same. As Martin (1989: 62-63) writes:

> Conscious knowledge of language and the way it functions in social contexts then enables us to make choices, to exercise control. As long as we are ignorant of language, it and ideological systems it embraces control us. Learning about language means learning to choose. . . . Knowledge is power. Meaning is choice. Please choose.

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APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

SECTION 1

1. Country _____

2. Number of years as educationist _____

3. Current position (include education level of students)

   _____

4. Sex _____

SECTION 2

(Note: Gender-Exclusive refers to the use of male nouns and pronouns, such as "man" and "he", to refer to both males and females. Gender-Inclusive refers to the use of nouns and pronouns, such as "humanity" and "they", which more clearly include females.)

5. When you were a student, were you taught gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive English? (CIRCLE ONE)

   a. Gender-Exclusive
   b. Gender-Inclusive

6. Had you heard about gender-inclusive English before coming for this course?

   a. Yes
   b. No

7. In the English you read in the past year - in and out of school - before coming to RELC, approximately what percentage of the time did you find gender-inclusive English being used? (CIRCLE ONE)

   a. 100%
   b. 75%
   c. 50%
   d. 25%
   e. 0%
   f. I didn't pay attention

8. As a teacher or materials writer do you currently teach/use Gender-Exclusive or Gender-Inclusive English? (CIRCLE ONE)

   a. Gender-Exclusive
   b. Gender-Inclusive

9. Would you advise your colleagues to teach/use Gender-

Exclusive or Gender-Inclusive English? (CIRCLE ONE)

a. Gender-Exclusive
b. Gender-Inclusive

10. If teachers/materials writers in your country teach their students about gender-inclusive English or use it in the materials they write, what kind of reaction would they receive from administrators? (CIRCLE ONE)

a. Positive
b. Neutral
c. Negative

11. If teachers/materials writers in your country teach their students about gender-inclusive English or use it in the materials they write, what kind of reaction would they receive from society? (CIRCLE ONE)

a. Positive
b. Neutral
c. Negative

12. Will you in the future teach/use Gender-Exclusive or Gender-Inclusive English? (CIRCLE ONE)

a. Gender-Exclusive
b. Gender-Inclusive

13. Would you encourage students to use gender-inclusive English in their writing and speaking? (CIRCLE ONE)

a. Yes
b. No

SECTION 3

For each pair of sentences below, put a tick next to the one sentence in the pair that you would generally be most likely to use in your own writing, assuming that you had to choose one.

1.

___ Parents Evenings are important not only to discuss your child's progress in individual subjects, but also to consider his involvement in this community in general.

___ Parents Evenings are important not only to discuss your children's progress in individual subjects, but also to consider their involvement in this community in general.

2.

___ The student who is satisfied with his or her performance on the pretest will take the posttest.

___ The student who is satisfied with his performance on the

pretest will take the posttest.

3.

___ Engineers and technologists use physics to solve practical problems for the benefit of mankind.

___ Engineers and technologists use physics to solve practical problems for the benefit of humanity.

4. (Note: Some of those attending the conference may be female.)

___ There are about 100 businesspeople present at the conference.

___ There are about 100 businessmen present at the conference.

5.

___ The average pupil is worried about his grades.

___ The average pupil is worried about grades.

APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW ON THE USE OF GENDER-EXCLUSIVE/INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

Thank you for completing the questionnaire. We appreciate your help with our study. To get more information about the reasoning behind people's answers on the questionnaire, we have randomly chosen 8 course members to be interviewed. You are one of the people chosen.

Could we trouble you to make an appointment to be interviewed by two of us? Below are the questions we will ask. You can see that they are taken from the questionnaire, with follow-up questions to probe more deeply. As with the questionnaire, all names and responses will be confidential.

Interview questions

1. In the English you read in the past year - in and out of school - before coming to RELC, approximately what percentage of the time did you find gender-inclusive English being used? (CIRCLE ONE)

   a. 100%
   b. 75%
   c. 50%
   d. 25%
   e. 0%
   f. I didn't pay attention

Please expand on this.

2. As a teacher or materials writer do you currently teach/use Gender-Exclusive or Gender-Inclusive English? (CIRCLE ONE)

   a. Gender-Exclusive
   b. Gender-Inclusive

Why? How? For example, will you model this type of English (Gender-Exclusive or Gender-Inclusive) in your speaking and writing? Will you use materials which use this type of English? Will you mark students wrong if they use the other type? Will you give students explanations about why the should use that type of English and exercises in which they practice using that type of English?

3. Would you advise your colleagues to teach/use Gender-Exclusive or Gender-Inclusive English? (CIRCLE ONE)

   a. Gender-Exclusive
   b. Gender-Inclusive

How would you go about convincing and teaching colleagues about this?

4. Will you in the future teach/use Gender-Exclusive or

Gender-Inclusive English? (CIRCLE ONE)

a. Gender-Exclusive
b. Gender-Inclusive

Why? Please refer to the various arguments on behalf of each type:

Reasons for using Gender-Exclusive:

a. Attitude - Your readers/listeners may think you are a radical feminist who opposes traditional values.

b. Correctness - Gender-Inclusive may be considered wrong.

c. Tradition - Gender-Exclusive has been the standard way for many years. This was how we were taught.

d. Elegance - Expressions such as "he or she" are cumbersome. Just using "he" is more elegant language usage.

e. Importance - This whole Gender-Exclusive/Gender-Inclusive issue is such a small matter, when there are so many more important matters on which to spend instructional time.

f. Effectiveness - Even if Gender-Inclusive English is used, it will not change the problems that females face. Changing a few pronouns and nouns will not affect people's thinking and behaviour.

Reasons for using Gender-Inclusive:

a. Justice - Gender-Inclusive English is fairer to females.

b. Comprehensibility - When Gender-Exclusive English is used, some people may not be clear that we are referring to both females and males.

c. Attitude - If we use Gender-Exclusive English, some people may feel that we are against equality for women.

d. Correctness - Standards are changing. Now, and especially in the future, Gender-Exclusive English may be seen as incorrect.

5. Would you encourage students to use gender-inclusive English in their writing and speaking? (CIRCLE ONE)

a. Yes
b. No

Why? Why not?

6. When you first heard or saw Gender-Inclusive English, did

it sound and look strange to you?

7. Who is your favourite movie star? (Just kidding)

8. Did you say you will use Gender-Inclusive English just to please us, the researchers?

9. If you had to write an essay in English and the essay would be used by your Ministry of Education to decide whether you would get a better job, would you use Gender-Exclusive or Gender-Inclusive English in the essay?